The Final Goodbye

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The Final Goodbye

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Summary

Before they were married, before Katinka's birthday, Hannibal and Will traveled to Romania to see to Nigel and Gabi's unfinished affairs. They learned much of the couple. Troubling things. Concerning things. Fascinating things. And it was also an opportunity to learn more about one another in the process.

Notes

Hello, all! This is just a short story in the *Me and Mr. Lecter* series. Something to tie it all together. I hope you all enjoy it!

Important note: This is part of the same series as *Mr. Lecter* and *Identical to the Ideal*. If you didn't read either of those, this might be a tad confusing, boring or lackluster. I would recommend reading the first two before this, but I'm not your keeper. :)

See the end of the work for more notes

The Final Goodbye

The last time Will traveled this route, a similar course, he took a train. It did not end well. Days leading up to their departure, he insisted another journey along a stretching track would be fine. Will was fine. He *would* be fine.

Irrational fears didn't stop them from being real. A visceral response didn't make it any less true for all the logic it lacked. Every hour approaching boarding the passenger train, first-class cabin or not, made the tremor in Will's hands more pronounced. He twitched and jumped and flinched at any sound and shadow that caught him unaware. And he was always unaware as of late. He woke screaming one night, the sound of twisting metal echoing in his ears long after he woke.

Suffice it to say, Hannibal bought three plane tickets to Bucharest before they even had breakfast the morning following Will's nightmare.

Hannibal managed to find a flight that took only five hours. Will appreciated the consideration but layovers weren't a concern for him. Even if they had to stay in the air and hop from airport to airport for twenty-eight hours, Will couldn't protest too much about the change in plans. At that moment, almost anything was preferable to Will stepping one foot onto a train.

They had about two hours left before making their descent into Romania. The sprawling, sparkling grid of Bucharest wasn't quite in view yet. Mountains and forests and lakes and rivers, interspersed now and again with sleepy hamlets and quiet towns. For a moment, Will could pretend he was still admiring the wild pockets of land in Lithuania. Or even flying over the dense forests of West Virginia, on his way to showing the most important people in his life what he considered home before they found him. Will tried to lose himself in the greens and blues of the earth below as he rocked Katinka, stealing glances of the man beside him from time to time.

As if returning to a mourning period, Will's constantly dapper fiancé was dressed in dark clothing. Black slacks, black shirt and vest beneath a black jacket. Black tie. Black Italian leather shoes shined to perfection. Shades of black that Will didn't realize existed before he met the good doctor. Immaculate and imposing and more than once did Will see fellow travelers and attendants alike double-take at the impressive figure the man cut.

Sensing he was being observed, Hannibal looked up from the book he had been reading. There was a strain to him the past week, perhaps longer. A barely discernible tightness around amber eyes and sharp jaw. A trace of a smile eased that tension as he took in Will and the baby dozing against his shoulder. One hand left the fragile pages of his book to straighten a nonexistent wrinkle in Katinka's puffy dress sleeve, before finding its way higher to toy with one of Will's curls he hadn't yet had time to lop off.

Hannibal considered him for a few more quiet moments. It could be considered random, what Hannibal chose to say after so long silent, but it wasn't to Will. “Before Christianity reached this part of the world, Lithuanians had much more open—and pagan—beliefs about death.”

“Superstitions?”

“Plenty. Accidents were thought to be bad luck. Multiple deaths at once in a family were ill omens. It is why it was once common to wish people a 'good' and 'happy' death, for it was believed a person's death followed them into the beyond. They also would keep the bodies of loved ones at their family home before burial. Family and members of the community would visit the body to pay their last respects and bring the deceased items intended to aid them in the afterlife—food and articles of clothing.”

“A send-off.” Will took hold of Hannibal's hand to squeeze.

“They called it the 'final goodbye.'” Hannibal kissed Will's hand before lowering their clasped fingers to rest against his thigh, book forgotten for the moment.

They came to Romania to possibly identify the remains of Gabi Ibanescu. They flew to another country to organize and settle the shambles of a life ended by harsh circumstances. A life she shared with Nigel Lecter. They were going to fulfill Gabi and Nigel's last wishes as best they could, once they landed in a city Will never thought he would go back to.

As much as Will hated returning to this place, opening wounds only recently scabbed over, he knew it had to be done. Though, that didn't make the trip and all that would follow any easier to stomach. For all that Will felt, emotions threatening to spill out of him and drown him where he sat, he knew nothing he felt matched the turmoil thrashing around beneath the calm Hannibal was fighting to contain.

This wasn't a vacation. A lover's weekend. A family retreat. It wasn't going to be pleasant.

Will maneuvered his hand around so he could run his fingers along the inside of Hannibal's wrist. Delicate skin, soft and warm. A thin barrier between the outside world and the vulnerable veins within. The pulse against Will's fingertips was calm and strong. He guessed it would be exactly the rate it should be. Textbook perfect. It would never rise, never falter. Not for something so banal as grief and anger.

Hannibal could give in to his rage, his insatiable hunger for chaos and mayhem, and his pulse would stay the same. Will could see that he wanted to. More than anything, Hannibal wanted an outlet for his pain. But one would never know by looking at the quiet man in black. Will gazed at Hannibal, seeing down to the bones. Allowed to see.

Just for him.

It made Will want to ask him to. Tell Hannibal. Request to be shown all the beautiful things Hannibal saw when he looked around him. Will saw Hannibal's sadness and wanted to help him paint the world red with it.

Will leaned over the armrest separating them and kissed the sharp line of Hannibal's cheekbone. Hannibal smiled, a small and tentative thing. They stayed slumped together, comforted in their closeness with Katinka nestled between them. When it grew near the time they would land, Hannibal took their daughter from Will to settle her back into her bassinet.

Will sighed and watched the scenery below, preparing himself the best he could. No, this wasn't going to be a pleasure cruise. But, then again, when had he and Hannibal not made the most of whatever situation they found themselves in?

* * * * *

Nigel and Gabi employed a housekeeper Hannibal didn't see the sense of terminating the contract of. Once, Will would have thought such a service extravagant. Unnecessary. The idea of Hannibal paying for the upkeep and errands for a place in another country—where they would never go—seemed ridiculous. Now, Will was grateful for Hannibal's foresight and ability to deal with multiple tasks. Tasks during moments of high stress that, if left up to Will, would have been ignored until the last possible second.

The flight. The retrieval of luggage. The rental car. The groceries already delivered to where they would be staying. It was all taken care of by Hannibal with a few calls made. Will only had to follow, keeping Katinka close.

The car ride was silent. Each man preparing for the fast-approaching upheaval in their own way. Silent, but not unpleasant. Will took comfort in Hannibal's presence, as he knew Hannibal was just as soothed. They wouldn't be doing this alone. Together, they would make this journey into Hell and Will was grateful for the company.

They pulled up to their destination after weaving through afternoon traffic. Right into the heart of the bustling city. A building of sharp angles and mirrored glass. Looming over the noise and pollution and the manic energy surrounding it. Nigel owned this place. Flashy and impressive. *Just like the man himself*, Will couldn't help thinking. A five-storey monstrosity that overlooked old architecture and green parks, cathedrals and nightclubs alike.

Hannibal stepped out of the car to stand beside him and gaze up at the building, curious eyes hidden behind sunglasses. “Their apartment is on the top floor. The penthouse.”

“What was the rest of this used for?” Will hushed Katinka as she started to fuss. It was well-past her usual feeding and nap.

“I couldn't say. I don't think Nigel rented this building out to anyone else. It was just for them.” He lifted a set of keys up to Will's sight. “Shall we go in?”

They followed the curving walkway up to the front doors. What looked to be apple and plum trees lined the path. Flowering shrubs and bushes gave a pop of color to the gunmetal and slate building and entryway with their exotic-looking blossoms that Will knew Hannibal could tell him the exact name and meaning of each, if he asked.

Once inside, Hannibal slipped the keys into his pocket and turned to press a sequence of numbers into the flashing numberpad by the door. Each floor had a different passcode. The elevator required its own key and codes. Every main door to every floor was armed with alarms from the best security firm in the city. Hannibal was only given access to them all after spending multiple hours on the phone with the company, explaining who he was and what had happened to their former clients.

Will thought it all rather excessive, again, and beyond tedious. He didn't understand why anyone would need so many fail-safes and not be part of some government agency. That was until he stepped into the foyer.

Whatever the building once was, it held no signs of older architecture or the layout of an apartment lobby. It had been gutted and redesigned for modern tastes. Straight lines and dark colors. Glass walls gave an unobstructed view of the entire first floor. A personal gym. What he thought at first was a home theater turned out to be a music room near the back. It wasn't an Olympic-size swimming pool, but Will guessed it wasn't far off. A hot tub and sauna room were tucked away close to the pool.

In the middle of it all was an atrium. Opened throughout each floor until the sky could be seen above. Most of the plants looked a bit wilted and dying, in need of some care and watering. Will could imagine what it must have looked like with constant upkeep. A secret garden at the heart of a metropolis that never slept.

Their footsteps echoed on the marble floors, off stonewashed walls. To think they had four more floors yet to explore was a little overwhelming. Thankfully, Hannibal took them to the elevator and straight to the fifth floor.

Will didn't know what he expected, but it wasn't what met them when they let themselves into the penthouse. Honey-light wood floors and differing shades of white and gray. Black and silver accents. And a shocking amount of rose gold. A touch of pink to most of the rooms they peeked into. Will couldn't help smiling at the scheme and thought of the scant amount of time he got to spend with Gabi. A Bohemian punk; sharp and spiky and vibrant with still that touch of feminine beauty woven into all of her edges.

And all around hints of Nigel's influence.

Will admired the view from the wall of windows in the living room without venturing out onto the furnished balcony. The surrounding buildings and parks were a pleasantly contrasting scene, with a river winding around behind it all. “I bet it's a sight at night—all the lights.”

“I imagine so,” Hannibal agreed and motioned at something behind him.

Will turned and his breath caught. On the opposite wall was a Modernist mosaic stretching the length of it. Tiles of black, silver and gold. A rendition of Bucharest at night. The skyscrapers glittering and alight beneath a full moon. It was mesmerizing and Will had to tear his eyes away from it or risk staring for hours, lost in the details.

Their exploration came to a brief halt as Katinka decided then that she had enough of wandering about, no closer to having a bottle or a nap. Will patted her back and let her yell all her bad temper out into his shoulder while Hannibal retrieved formula from her bag. As he searched for what all was needed to make her a bottle, Will sat on one of the stools at the island counter that separated the small kitchen from the rest of the dining and living room.

Hannibal shed his jacket to drape over another stool and rolled his sleeves up. It wouldn't take much, or long, to make and heat the formula, but he stood over the saucepan with a stern

concentration suited for a more complex dish.

“Tell me what you are thinking at this very moment, Will,” Hannibal said into the silence without turning from the stove.

“Nigel might have had an even more showy sense of taste than you.” That won him a chuckle and Will smiled.

“You haven't seen the house in Vilnius yet.”

“True. Wait. Does your house have five floors? Please, tell me it doesn't.”

Hannibal was quiet for a moment, and it wasn't just because he was concentrating on pouring warm liquid into a bottle. “Do basements count in the overall number?”

“Of course, they do.”

“Just four, then.”

“Oh, 'just four.' That's way more reasonable than five.”

Hannibal rounded the bar and took Katinka to help her eat. He kissed Will before he stepped away. “I think so.”

After a while of calm silence, a troubling thought came to Will. “Does this place have a basement?”

Again, that specific kind of pause that had nothing to do with Hannibal multi-tasking. “No. There is an underground garage, however.”

“Same difference.”

“Is it? Then, I suppose there is a basement.”

Will laughed and shook his head. Everything felt ridiculous in that moment. Their lives were absurd. But Hannibal was smiling at him, gently burping Katinka. Grief not forgotten but dulled for the moment. Will would give anything to take that from him. He'd do anything to take back his part in what caused his pain. However, there was only the way forward, no matter how one wished they could reverse time. So Will tried to keep that smile in place for a little longer.

'Do you also have an atrium?”

“Sadly, no. It is lovely, isn't it? Perhaps, I should draw up some plans. See if there is a way to incorporate one into the house.” He was probably only slightly serious.

Will scoffed. “I can just build you a greenhouse.”

“What if I want a moon garden?” Hannibal immediately countered.

“How hard could that be?” Did he just agree to partake in some elaborate project?

Delighted, Hannibal kissed him again. Will took Katinka back, wiping her face while Hannibal cleaned up. Neither of them were hungry. They left the kitchen to explore further. A door beside the refrigerator led not into a bathroom, pantry, laundry or anywhere else reasonable but a massive wine room. The walls were shelves and drawers. Each stocked with bottles Will was wary to approach, terrified to break. From Hannibal's appreciative glances, there must have been some excellent and costly vintages amongst the labels.

Hannibal opened a door down the hall at the opposite end of the apartment and they both stilled, taking in the room revealed for a few silent moments before stepping inside. The same light wood for the floors. White walls and gray accents. A room large enough to grow into over the years. White and gray furniture, with a few pieces of navy blue or dusky rose. A small table with chairs shaped like rabbits. Against the far wall was a crib adorned in white ruffles and pink satin. A mobile of glittery butterflies hung above it.

While Will changed Katinka and put her to bed, wound up the mobile to play a quiet lullaby, Hannibal explored the room. He poked about on each shelf, marked the contents of the closet and checked in every drawer. Curious and determined to find out all he could with the barest information given to him. By the time Will finished, Hannibal stood at a window, looking out at the city below.

“This could have been Katinka's home.” Hannibal didn't turn to him, voice quiet and rough. “Less than a year ago, this *was* her home. She had a life here. A future in Romania. With a mother and father. Gone in an instant.”

Will cautiously approached to pull him around to face him, keeping him in a gentle hold. “This is still a part of her life, Hannibal. Not everything is gone. It'll be here for her, if she ever wants to come back. We'll keep it for her until then.” Will leaned close, wrapping his arms around broad shoulders. He kissed Hannibal and held him tighter. “Her home is with us. Robertus and Murasaki. Mischa. You and me. We're her fathers now.”

Hannibal buried his face in Will's neck. A tear slid down his throat as Hannibal wept softly against his shoulder. “Yes, we are.”

Will gave Hannibal some space for the rest of the afternoon. They both needed some time alone. To process the emotions of the day. Once more find their calm and prepare for everything they set out to do while in Romania. Will brought their bags up and checked on Katinka now and again, making sure she didn't sleep straight through the day and be a massive terror in the night.

It didn't seem right to search more of the apartment. Not without Hannibal. Not until he was ready. Instead, Will mainly kept to the nursery and living room. Then, as the afternoon dimmed to evening and Will rocked Katinka in the chair beside her crib, there came a quiet knock at the door before Hannibal let himself in.

He looked better. In the time they were apart, Hannibal concealed all of his jagged thorns made visible by the thinning control on his torrential emotions. No longer did a choking cloud of melancholy surround him. Still dressed for a funeral. Always devilishly striking.

When Will smiled upon seeing him, Hannibal came to kneel beside the rocking chair. He captured Will in a kiss with one hand while cradling the back of Katinka's head with the other.

He pulled away just enough to release his lips and Will chased after, seeking one more kiss. “Hi,” was all Will could think to say.

Hannibal's laugh was a breath of sound. Lips tickled Will's cheek as they trailed up and along the curve of it to the scar on his forehead. Gentle fingers gave a playful tug to the curls at his nape. “Good evening, Will.” He leaned back after a parting kiss. “I made dinner.”

“Really?” Hannibal nodded and leaned down to rest his head against Will's thigh, wrapping his arms around Will's waist as best he could manage. He sighed in contentment when Katinka cooed and babbled, excitedly diving her hands into his carefully styled hair. Will smiled and joined in her rearranging of the silky strands. “I know you had groceries stocked here, but you didn't have to do that.” It was as close to chiding as Will would get.

“I know.”

“I figured we'd just order in.” Will had a feeling neither of them felt like going out. “Even Count Lecter needs a break sometimes.”

Hannibal shrugged, huffing out an indignant sound that could have been a laugh when Katinka began patting at his face. “I needed to keep myself busy. Cooking has always been more enjoyment than chore for me. It helped in centering myself.”

Will continued running his hand through Hannibal's hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. “A clutch for balance.”

Hannibal sat up and took Will's hand, kissing his palm, before he stood. “Precisely. Please, join me at the table, Will.”

Will carried Katinka out to the living room and laid her out on the blanket with her toys he already set up earlier. He made sure all her friends were in reach before he turned to the dining table. Everything was in place. As much as it could be. No flower arrangements or candelabras. An elaborate centerpiece wouldn't fit well at this table. Not with the large, golden chandelier hanging low above it.

That didn't mean it wasn't a grand and theatrical sight, with the curtains to the balcony pulled aside and Bucharest waking up for the night as a backdrop.

He sat at the white and gray marble table and waited for Hannibal to bring whatever he had worked on from around the bar. A bottle of white wine was ready to be poured. Will filled their glasses just as Hannibal set two plates down close together.

“First, liver mousse with a blueberry conserva on sour cherry crostini.”

“*First?*” Hannibal only smiled at Will's question. “What kind of liver?”

“Unfortunately, it's only duck.”

Will bit into the crisp bread. The tartness of the sauce and saltiness of the creamy, whipped liver played across his tongue in an explosion of contrasting but undeniably complimentary flavors. He hummed in appreciation, suddenly starving. The feeling only intensified, as it always did, when he noticed Hannibal watching him as he ate, his own dinner ignored. Will finished a crostino and sipped his wine.

He waited for Hannibal to sink his teeth into his own luscious bite before speaking. “Perhaps, we could go out and look for some proper ingredients.”

It was the first time he had mentioned it in weeks. Not since their time in Majorca. Hannibal's hunting excursions. Will's desire to join him. Without a deadline. No outside influence forcing their hands to act. Just them, and the pleasure of taking a life they deemed worthy. Together. Working as one.

Hannibal swallowed, eyes somehow darkening even beneath the glow of the golden lights above. Amber brown to maroon velvet. The finest whiskey to dark garnet. “Perhaps.”

Will laid his hand over Hannibal's. “Not now, of course. It doesn't have to be anytime soon. I just think it would be good for us.” He slipped his fingers beneath the band of Hannibal's watch, pressing against the pulse at his wrist he found there. It was slowly elevating. “It could relieve some tension.”

The slightest flush warmed Hannibal's cheeks. “I agree completely.”

They finished the rest of the course in silence. No music playing softly in the background. Not even the sound of cutlery against porcelain. Just the breathing between them and the ruckus of Katinka playing on the floor. A balm to Will's frayed nerves. He was more relaxed than he had been in a week by the time Hannibal brought out the next dishes.

“Are those tostadas,” Will asked as he stared at the plate of thin, stacked flatbread placed on the table. A second later, the toasted scent reached him. “Did you make *fresh* tostadas?”

“Yes.” Said as if Will was the strange one. Hannibal returned with two shallow bowls. “Scallop aguachile.”

For a moment, Will could only stare down at what was placed in front of him. Thin slices of large scallops, red onions and some kind of chili peppers. All arranged in a ruby-red broth. It smelled fragrant and sweet and *hot*. And even though Will just finished a plate of rich duck liver, his mouth watered in anticipation.

He spooned some of the seafood onto a tostada. The buttery, salted tortilla gave a satisfying crunch as he bit into it. Tangy fruit that Will couldn't quite place flooded his palate first. Acidity from the broth and the bite of onion was a rather gentle distraction before the heat came for him. Also sweet, but whatever Hannibal used made a pleasant warmth tickle his throat. A rush of fire through his blood.

After finishing one, Hannibal said, “I know this is a rather spare offering after such a long week, and an even more tedious journey. I confess, I didn't plan ahead for the menu as I

usually do. As I said earlier, I needed to occupy my mind and hands. This is what I came up with, after some experimentation with the ingredients provided.

“Aguachile is usually a paler, more green, dish, but I couldn't resist trying a ceviche with pomegranates and blood oranges, along with Meyer lemon and red onion. And Elena managed to find some aji and habanero chilies whilst out shopping for us.”

Very rarely did Will witness Hannibal in such a state. The man never seemed to get nervous. Will often wondered if he was capable of fear. Definitely not shame. This was one of the only times Will could remember seeing anything but confidence from Hannibal. He was close to fidgeting. As much as a person like him could. Apologetic. As if he was not at the level of perfection he was used to performing. As if Will would ever care that Hannibal was not at his best.

Will laughed. A chuckle that turned into something akin to a giggle. He couldn't help it. Before Hannibal could take offense, offer more ridiculous excuses at his supposed slip in quality, Will leaned close and pulled him into a kiss. Meal set aside for the time being. The cause of his mirth evaporated from Will's mind, replaced with nothing but Hannibal.

There was an extra heat between them. Lips warmed from chilies, sweet like wine from the broth. It made Will feel wolfish with the sudden spike of appetite. He cradled Hannibal's jaw with careful hands as he nibbled red lips and sucked on a ceaselessly eloquent tongue, thumbs mindless in their caressing of the stubble that grew back over the course of the day. When had he completely abandoned his dinner? It didn't matter.

“It's perfect. Delicious. Just what I needed.” Will soothed Hannibal's doubts between demanding kisses. “For a second, I thought we were somewhere else. Someplace warmer. Somewhere bright and beautiful.”

“Is that where you want to go,” Hannibal asked before nipping at Will's bottom lip, soothing the nearly split skin with the gentle laving of a sinful tongue. “A paradise, full of sun and music and color? Is that what you want?”

Will nodded and smothered any more questions or poetic comments with bruising kisses that he could feel were on the verge of something manic. He trailed a hand down along Hannibal's throat and sternum to rest over his heart. “I don't want to be here. I don't want *you* to be here. I want to take you both away and never come back.”

Hannibal's eyes fluttered closed at his admission. He kept Will's hand where it was, foreheads resting against one another. Their breathing calmed, their heartbeats synced. Hannibal exhaled on a gentle sigh before opening his eyes. Composed once more, resolved. Will felt Hannibal pull back inside himself, like a drawer slipping shut to conceal the clutter within. Will's hand was kissed before it was released.

“Finish your food, Will. We need to retire early.” Hannibal took extra care in assembling another tostada. A perfect balance of scallops and peppers, drizzled in broth, that he placed on Will's plate. He began the process again for himself as he said, “I feel we have a long day ahead of us.”

* * * * *

Will thought it would take longer to find her. There were still so many among the lost. The unnamed. He had prepared himself for a drawn-out morning of looking into the mangled faces of the dead before maybe recognizing one, if he was lucky. A morbid needle in a ghoulish haystack. He had hoped to manage such a task without succumbing to the panic attack he felt creeping along his spine all week.

What actually happened was that Will, with Hannibal beside him, glanced at two pale faces amongst a stretching row of shrouded bodies before he stepped up to another table and was looking down at familiar features. Gone was the bloom and beauty of youth. Rosy cheeks and glossy lips traded for a blue-tinged pallor. Evidence of a violent death but not as abused as some of those who met the same fate. Definitely in better condition than her late husband.

So completely different than the last time he saw her. Faded in every way. Even the vibrancy of her red hair lost its glow. But she was unmistakable. Will would never forget Gabi Ibanescu. One word of confirmation from him and Hannibal took care of the paperwork and arrangements to bring her to the Lecter estate. A plot already prepared for her at the family cemetery. Will sat in the waiting room, holding Katinka while Hannibal saw to everything else. It was then, as he kissed Katinka's plump cheeks and teased her with her favored lamb, that Will realized it wasn't luck that made the entire ordeal relatively painless.

Hannibal had already narrowed down the search for Gabi.

Long before they even made plans for this trip. Not only was he able to get a positive ID on a woman he never met, but somehow managed to have her remains included among those shipped back to Romania. This process should have been prolonged, harrowing. Including a trip to Druskininkai. Back to the hospital Will had been taken to. Back to where Nigel still waited.

Somehow, Hannibal pulled the right strings to make happen what he wanted. It should have unsettled Will, Hannibal's seemingly endless reach and influence. At the moment, all he could manage to feel was an immense amount of gratitude and love for the control freak. And once they were in the safety of their rental car, with Katinka babbling away in the backseat, Will turned to Hannibal and pulled him into his arms.

Hannibal didn't wonder at his sudden need for contact. He didn't question Will's clingyness. Will was held just as tight. A moment taken to settle their nerves. Yet another clutch for balance. Will could only hope Hannibal was soothed as much as he was.

“Thank you. However you made all that happen—all that go away—thank you.”

Hannibal was quiet for a moment, running his fingers through Will's hair. An action Will wasn't even sure he was entirely aware of performing. He was surprised Will knew of his machinations but didn't attempt to deny what he did. “I only wish I could have spared you from having to identify the body.” He tightened his hold when Will shuddered at the memory. Lips pressed to his forehead, grazing the remnants of the ugly gash that once was there.

It was still morning. There were a few more things on the agenda for the day. Unpleasant things. Tedious and uncomfortable. The sooner they began, the sooner they would be finished. One step closer to going home.

They held onto each other for a little while longer.

* * * * *

The next part of their morning led them to the other side of the city from the morgue. It was fitting that dark clouds grew over Bucharest until, finally, rain poured through the busy streets. A mirror reflecting the maudlin atmosphere inside them. They drove not to the outskirts, but the rougher side of the city. Warehouses and industrial-looking buildings. A few blocks south would be the pier and docks. A whole other world came to life there once night fell. In just a handful of hours, the streets would be packed.

Will took notice of the signs Hannibal drove by and looked out the window to darkened alleys and run-down streets. “I used to live not too far from here. Small world.”

A faint smile curved Hannibal's pale lips. He never took his eyes off the slick asphalt. “Indeed, it is. Shall we stop by your old apartment?”

Will scoffed and shook his head. “No, thank you. I'm sure the slum lord who rented to me already has someone else in there. Probably sold whatever I left behind,” he pondered aloud.

“What was a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?”

As if Hannibal didn't know. Will smiled again as he watched random shops and buildings pass. “Fishing.”

They pulled up to a two-storey warehouse. A gritty, shady place like all the other surrounding establishments. But it was well-kept and secured. As Hannibal unfastened Katinka from her seat, Will retrieved the umbrella and met him around the side of the car. The rain had yet to exhaust itself. They kept close, Katinka tucked into the safety of Hannibal's arms, as they made their way up the paved walk to the entrance.

Someone was waiting for them at the door.

“I guess punctuality is a Lecter trait,” the man who showed them in said.

There was the slightest pause from Hannibal as he took in the comment, the trace of condescension hidden beneath the pleasant tone. Barely there and almost impossible to spot, but Will noticed. Hannibal's smile was full of barbs. He held out the hand not supporting Katinka for their host to shake.

“I understand you're a busy man and didn't want to keep you more than I already am. Dr. Hannibal Lecter,” he formally introduced himself. “This is my fiancé, Will. I'm sure you've already made the acquaintance of Katinka.”

“Darko.” He gave Hannibal's hand a quick shake before stepping back, smiling at them both. His good humor dimmed when he looked at the baby. “Hello, darling. I won't lie and say it's

nice to meet you. You understand."

"Quite. I appreciate you letting us look in Nigel's office."

Darko lit a cigarette and took a deep drag, blowing the smoke away from them and Katinka. "I don't really know why you came all the way out here. I gave everything that might have been important to that investigator you sent months ago." When Hannibal only waited, he shrugged and started walking through the darkened room. "Suit yourself. Sorry for the mess. I'm in the middle of some renovations."

Hannibal told Will of the man he spoke to briefly on the phone when he arranged for a meeting. Will didn't know what to expect and shouldn't have been surprised when he met Nigel's business partner. Smartly dressed. Approachable in a way that was difficult for Nigel to be. Darko hid all of his sharp edges behind a handsome face, charming smiles and a friendliness that could easily make anyone forget he was just as ruthless as Nigel.

Right up until the veneer ripped away to reveal the brutality beneath.

Will pondered that thought as they were taken through the main area of what was once a club. No one else was around. Silent darkness in what was usually a place filled with pulsing lights and thumping music. All gutted. Sheets of plastic covered the floors and walls, exposed wiring hung from the ceilings. A recent undertaking. Most likely began after it was clear Nigel wasn't coming back.

"I don't know what you expect to find. Or take off the premises."

"Only what I think I'll need to settle Nigel's accounts. Personal effects he may have brought here. I won't disturb your business, I assure you," Hannibal said with a charming smile.

"Because you know all about mine and Nigel's business, I'm sure," Darko muttered around his cigarette. Up the metal staircase, a brightly lit corridor met them. Different from the chaos below. A muffled kind of quiet. Where business could safely be conducted.

Katinka babbled against Hannibal's shoulder, deciding right then was the best time to start tugging on his tie and reach for the sunglasses he forgot to push to the top of his head in case of just this situation. The master of misdirection, Hannibal distracted her with a kiss to her cheek and tickling touches against her ribs. Ridiculously expensive sunglasses were immediately forgotten. Her shrieks of laughter echoed around them. Will smiled, watching it all as he trailed behind them.

Darko seemed to recoil at their interaction, walking faster. It wasn't grief. Hannibal carting around Katinka didn't upset him. Nigel's twin wandering around his place of business wasn't disturbing him like it would some people. Darko was keeping his distance because of the baby. He didn't think he would ever see her again. Any of the Lecters. Not because of a particular disaster. It was just a detail he had already accepted and now he had them all over where he didn't expect, nor want, them to be.

Poking around. In his territory. This was not their business. They didn't belong in Darko's world.

Will was torn from Darko's misgivings and annoyance when he stopped in front of a closed door. He held out a key, nearly shoving it into Will's hand, before retreating back the way he brought them. “Drop that off on the bar before you leave. Thank you.”

“Thank *you*,” Hannibal said to the man's back, knowing full-well his smile was not seen nor shared.

Hannibal didn't comment on Darko's abrupt manner. In fact, Will realized Hannibal had fallen back into the role of the naïve, rich socialite. Cheerful playboy, who didn't understand a thing going on around him. His favorite part to play.

That meant he picked up on what Will had. Perhaps, something else. Something more that Will had yet to glean from their surroundings.

They exchanged glances before Will unlocked the door. He flicked on the light and they both paused in the threshold, suspicions forgotten for the time being as they took in the room. A physical memory. A moment frozen in time. Someone had cleaned recently. The smell of chemicals was fresh, but beneath that were traces lingering of the man the space belonged to. Darko must not enter often. Locked up tight, preserving the past.

Until he had callers come to ask around.

The thought was in and out of Will's head before he could study it. Too many things grabbed for his attention at once to settle on any individual detail. What solidified first for him was the smell. Not the bite of bleach and industrial cleaner, but the soft and subtle scents beneath. Cigarettes and aftershave. Dark and smoky and warm. Will remembered that strangely sweet scent, that phantom heat. Before the pain came, he had been engulfed in both at one time.

It drew him into the room, beckoned him closer. To what, he couldn't say. Nigel wasn't here anymore. Not even his ghost. Will had wandered over to the lone window in the somewhat plain and dated office, lost in fleeting moments shared with the dead. It was still overcast outside. Rain pattered the windowpane, splashing the sill where it was cracked open a few inches. He traced a finger along the edge of the glass ashtray left behind there. The bottom was filled with ashes now damp from stray drops of rain. One cashed filter atop the dark mound. Nigel's last smoke before leaving.

“By windows and doors now, to protect the baby,” Will murmured.

“Katinka must have accompanied him here often.”

Will turned to Hannibal, at his comment, and looked where he motioned. A corner of the room had been repurposed for Katinka. A shelf that probably once held books, files and trinkets now held soft toys and spare supplies for any feeding or changing needs. A pink blanket with satin edges was folded and left on the end of the black leather loveseat nearby. Hannibal made use of the bassinet beside it, securing Katinka within before starting his endeavor to search and sort.

It all gave Will further pause. Though she was only a few months old at the time, Nigel brought Katinka with him often. Was Gabi busy? Tired? Bedridden from pregnancy? It spoke

to Will of a detachment of sorts. And a protective kind of possessiveness that Nigel had for the baby. It unsettled him, to have her out of his sight for too long. Best to keep her close. Thoughts of security measures tickled the back of Will's mind and it took some effort to shake free of them as he moved to help Hannibal.

“What should I look for?” Will came to Hannibal as he rifled through one of the binders kept on a shelf full of them—all grouped by differing colors that meant nothing to either man.

“Contrary to what our prickly host imagines, I'm not interested in taking anything that will interfere with him conducting his business. I only want Nigel's personal effects, things he left behind that hold no value to Mr. Darko.” Hannibal closed the red binder he flipped through, placed it back where it came from and grabbed a blue one to give the same cursory treatment. “That said, I will need to make copies of tax forms and letters of ownership Lidija was unable to retrieve when she came here for me. Records. Any paperwork that might be needed later, for Katinka or us acting on her behalf.”

Will nodded and began his own search. It was all very dry and dull work. Aside from a few things: framed photos of Gabi and Katinka, random odds and ends of Nigel's—there wasn't much Will found to keep. Nothing that would fill one of the boxes they brought for that purpose. Old paperwork. Past tax forms. Order receipts. Invoices and scheduled meetings marked down that never came to pass. Will slumped back in the chair at the desk, having finished searching drawers and contemplated turning on the computer.

Nothing really to show for a life half-finished. Will glanced up from the pile he managed to gather, hoping Hannibal had better results from his search. He was over in the far corner of the room, back to Will as he looked through a file cabinet. Will immediately noticed the stiffening of his posture. Silent in the long moments after finding whatever he held in his hands. Deathly still. A coiled tension gathering in his limbs that had Will slipping from his seat to Hannibal's side. The sight of what disturbed Hannibal so deeply made Will's breath catch.

A photograph. Shoved into an otherwise empty folder in the cabinet. Put away to be forgotten. But Nigel never destroyed it.

Decades before. Black and white. Some sort of social gathering. The twins sat together but could have been countries apart for all the distance between them. They couldn't have been much older than eighteen. Hannibal was smiling to someone off to the side, out of the frame of the lens. Always charming someone. Bewitching and beguiling. Carefully styled hair so dark it was impossible to tell if it was bistre or off-black. Pale and gracile; the boy not yet grown into broad shoulders and athletic build. So beautiful he made Will want to strangle something with his bare hands.

And then there was Nigel.

Slouched and reclined in the chair next to Hannibal. The boredom in his eyes wasn't visible due to the sunglasses perched on his nose, but Will could feel it practically emanating from the paper. Not dressed in a bespoke suit, or even tailored slacks and silk buttondown like his brother. Tight jeans and an even tighter t-shirt. His hair wasn't slicked back like Hannibal's.

He let his longer hair reach just above his shoulders in tousled waves several shades lighter. Wild and tempestuous and chomping at the bit to escape his family's shadow.

Desperate to leave his past, and the demons that haunted him, far behind.

Hannibal slipped the photo into the breast pocket of the coat he had yet to remove. “Excuse me for a moment, Will. I'll fetch some of the boxes from the trunk. Stay with Katinka, please.”

At the quiet command, Will stayed behind. His instincts told him Hannibal needed a moment alone and he would give him all the time it took to process what he found. He spent the slowly crawling minutes checking on Katinka before returning to Nigel's desk. When he turned the computer on, it started up without a prompt for a password. A quick look around confirmed what Will already knew: there was nothing on the computer but basic programming. A factory reset, most likely. Possibly even a model to replace the one Nigel used.

It was then that Will considered how thoroughly clean the office was. Scrubbed clean, in every way. Nigel was obviously borderline, if not fully, a workaholic, but it still seemed strange to Will. Nothing out of place. Nothing to hint at what his and Darko's business actually was, aside from a few random and old receipts and invoices. Will looked at the meager pile he scrounged up and couldn't stop seeing his surroundings for what they truly were. An orderly and gentle ransacking. He sighed and shut down the computer, deciding not to voice his suspicions to Hannibal. Not yet.

He had a feeling he wouldn't have to.

* * * * *

After packing up what they could at Nigel's office, and a curt farewell from Darko, they returned to the apartment in the late afternoon. In between storms. The air was thick with humidity as Will brought the filled boxes up with them. Neither Will nor Hannibal had an appetite. Instead, Hannibal focused on feeding Katinka and putting her down for a nap.

When she was settled, there came an unspoken agreement between them that it was time to begin a more thorough exploration of Nigel and Gabi's sprawling home. Most of the doors within the apartment had yet to be opened, let alone passed through. After they found a place to sleep and a bathroom, there wasn't much need to. It felt like trespassing, to Will, and he was quite happy waiting for Hannibal to start them off.

Down the hall from the nursery, Hannibal finally clasped the ornate knobs of the French doors that led to the master bedroom. Their footsteps echoed on the marble floor as they came into the center of the room, taking in the opulence surrounding them. Everything was light and flowing. It wasn't cluttered, filled to bursting with riches, but the ivory and burnished silver furnishings were enough of a decadence on their own to hint at the lifestyle Nigel and Gabi lived.

That was, if the gleaming crystal chandelier in the center of the ceiling didn't immediately tip them off. Will's slow, curious turn of the room came to a halt when he faced what he assumed

was the closet. He couldn't have stopped the scoff of laughter from escaping him, even had he tried. The five panels of the sliding door to the closet were painted with Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*.

Will studied the replication of the painting for a moment. It was a nice contrast, the colors from the scene gave an otherwise subdued room of whites and pale blues a needed splash of livelier hues. He couldn't help himself from saying, “It could be worse, I suppose.” To Hannibal's questioning look, Will smiled. “It could be *Leda and the Swan*.”

“That would be an interesting choice for a bedroom,” Hannibal conceded, small smile there and gone just as quickly. Hannibal's attention was stolen once more and he turned to examine every bauble, every belonging, left out for his curious gaze.

It was surreal, stepping into the remains of a life ended. Especially, a life ended sooner than natural causes would dictate. It was never easy for Will. Those lives became his. Their endings attached themselves to him. It was what made him so good at working homicide cases, during his time with law enforcement. It was what was so destructive to him. He saw a lot. In the mundane. The unremarkable told him remarkable things.

He suspected they told Hannibal things, too.

Will watched Hannibal wander the room. It wasn't aimless, or for the sake of nosiness. There was a method to his search. Specific objects were picked up and examined, while others were completely ignored. A quiet study. The unending desire to know and understand.

It never escaped Will's notice; his fiancé's possessiveness. Everything Hannibal loved, deemed his, he watched over with a near-obsessive gaze. Nigel was no different than anything else belonging to Hannibal. He had missed out on so much of his twin's life, he would not squander his death. It was an opportunity to know him that Hannibal would make complete use of.

Hannibal came to a pause in his search, hands trailing delicate touches over what he found atop a small vanity. Nothing Will would wager belonged to Gabi. A brush and a comb made of polished wood. An extra pair of reading glasses with golden frames. Styling products and lotions. Deft fingers plucked a glass bottle up from the collection. He gently eased the intricately carved stopper out and breathed in a careful whiff of the scent. As his eyes drifted closed, Will came to stand beside him. Carnelian eyes opened, focusing on Will. Hannibal held the bottle out to him.

It was the same scent, though much stronger and vivid, as the one lingering in Nigel's office above the nightclub. At the questioning look Hannibal gave him, Will said, “My nose isn't as sensitive as yours. All I smell are green things. Ocean salt.” He leaned in and caught the scent again, considering. “Something dark—a heavy kind of sweetness.”

Hannibal smiled, always delighted with Will's thoughts and how he chose to describe the world. His growing and evolving senses of taste and smell. “Ambergris,” he supplied. “A rare ingredient. Expensive and decadent.”

Hannibal stood at the vanity a few moments longer. Will knew he was committing all the new details discovered to his memory, filling out the image of Nigel he had even further. So alike, and entirely different—the Brothers Lecter. Will wanted to tell Hannibal all the ways in which they contrasted. All the ways they were one and the same. But it wasn't time. Hannibal was still grasping for control of his emotions and Will didn't feel like pushing him over the edge. As glorious as that would be.

For now, Will let him be.

* * * * *

With the house cleaned, errands and chores seen to by Elena before their arrival, Will's time and effort could be expended on other pursuits. He worked his way downstairs, starting with the floor directly below the penthouse, once he left Hannibal to his own devices. He was a little concerned for the man, but Will didn't interfere.

Throughout the remainder of the dismal afternoon, Hannibal had nursed a few glasses of bourbon. No whites or pinks or fancy red vintages to inhale and savor. No ice, no fuss. Will didn't question or remark on it, understanding too well when alcohol was the only way to cope with stress and heartache. He gave Hannibal space to drown his sorrow in peace.

His exploration brought him to Nigel's home office. He smiled as he turned on the light and stepped inside. It was what he expected on the other side of Bucharest. The word *ostentatious* came to mind. As swanky as every other inch of the building. Quiet and relaxing, everything in its place. Nigel's neurotic sense of organization was a surprise, but it would greatly help Will find what he needed.

Time slipped by in a rhythmic kind of haze as he looked through shelves and drawers, scanning with quick flicks of his eyes files and forms before deciding what would stay and what would go. For now. In the end, everything would be boxed up and stored. Dust sheets spread over luxurious furniture and flashy décor. Forgotten and put away. Awaiting those who would never return, for Katinka to claim her birthright.

Will finally turned his attention to the large glass and steel desk that sat empty in the middle of the room. Imposing. Dominating the space. The presence of its owner seeped into the sharp angles and shining surface. Will sat in the black leather chair, the scent of cigarettes and musky cologne enveloping him.

He didn't bother with the computer. A man like Nigel wouldn't leave his password as 0001, or his wedding anniversary. It would never be something like Katinka's birthday, either. Nothing sentimental. It would be impossible to guess and he, most likely, didn't write it down. Will jostled the drawers and found nothing of too much interest in most of them. One was locked. Will fished a bent paperclip from his pocket. It wasn't the first lock he had to pick in the place.

An address book. A datebook. Old school. Full of things Nigel didn't want on his phone. Will resisted flipping through each, not wanting to get distracted. A wicked-looking tactical knife tossed in with extra pens and miscellaneous stationary. A phone that didn't hold a charge. A

thick roll of Romanian lei, held together tight by a rubber band. At least several thousand in the brightly colored banknotes.

A few photos that Will took time looking over. Nothing like what they found above the nightclub. Not the sweet photos of Katinka and Gabi framed and in places of honor atop the desk. Some were of Gabi and Nigel. A few years ago, around when they first met. Wild and beautiful and in love. Taken at parties and clubs. Others were grainy, black and white photos. Stills captured from surveillance cameras. Perhaps work-related. Will tossed them all on the pile he would take.

He reached to the very back of the drawer, sweeping his hand around to make sure nothing was missed. His fingertips hit something small and hard, sent rolling with the force of his movements. He caught whatever it was and pulled it out. For a moment, he just looked at it. Not in denial. Will had been piecing together a picture since they went to the nightclub. Ever since he shook Darko's hand and took in the man's uneasy resentment at welcoming them inside.

Will would have made a terrible cop if he hadn't already guessed at what Nigel and Darko were most likely involved in. Still, it was a little bit of a shock to be given tangible proof. Will looked closer at the small bottle. Dark amber glass. Unassuming. No label. It'd be foolish to do so. He could make out the contents but unscrewed the black cap anyway, pouring some onto the spotless surface of the desk.

White powder. A sample. Will stared at it for a moment longer. Possibly heroin. If he had to guess, he would say cocaine. More of the picture became clearer to Will. He took a sheet of paper from a notepad and used the edge to push the powder off the desk, watching it fall and swirl to nothingness in the air. The paper went in the trash. Everything was packed into a box. The bottle slipped inside his pocket, to be shown to Hannibal later.

Until then, Will had more rooms and belongings to sort through.

Gabi had a study of her own. Downstairs, next to the third-floor music room. For now, Will bypassed where she kept a small portion of her instruments and equipment. He would give her cellos the attention and care they deserved when the time came. Until then, there was something else that called to him. Not anything that would be found in the bow she left behind. The chance to find out more about the mysterious woman, Katinka's mother, the life Will briefly borrowed, was too tempting to ignore.

It was a smaller room than Nigel's office. A cozy study with a stereo tucked into one corner and shelves full of vinyl records and CDs instead of books and files. Spills of papers stacked on every available surface. Will smiled at the notes scribbled on music sheets he glanced at, reminded of Hannibal and his own talents. But as he looked around further, his smile dimmed as something niggled at the back of his mind, vying for his attention and consideration.

There were traces of Gabi and Katinka in Nigel's office. Pictures and keepsakes. Toys. A spare blanket and bassinet for when Katinka played or slept while her daddy worked. There was a wedding picture, or one he assumed from their wedding party, and a hospital portrait of Katinka on Gabi's cluttered desk. But something was off, to him. It felt obligatory.

Will pushed the strange apprehension aside to give Gabi's possessions the same care and treatment as Nigel's before boxing some of them up. As he sorted paperwork, browsing brief enough to understand the gist of each document, another detail of the departed became clear. It seemed Gabi never took Nigel's last name. If ever she was a Lecter, it didn't take long for her to start going by an Ibanescu on paper.

That same sense of foreboding followed Will around the room. With a slight feeling of dread he couldn't explain, he sat at the computer and turned it on. Gabi didn't bother with a password. Too impatient. Sure in the belief that she didn't need one. Almost petulant, really. A goad and a dare. *Go ahead and snoop, at your own risk.* Will wasn't surprised to find that when he brought it up, her email was never logged out of.

Nothing out of the ordinary. A portion of bills Gabi paid for were automated and up to date. An email here and there for doctor appointments. It had been months since anything was sent to her regarding schedules and playlists for the symphony. Will remembered that she took maternity leave. There were no personal correspondences. Not through that account, anyway. However, Will did find a receipt after scrolling back through older emails.

Months ago. Nearly a year ago. So much had happened since Gabi bought a plane ticket to Lithuania. One way. Paid for from an account that wasn't familiar to Will, after all the time looking through Nigel's credit card and bank statements. Gabi kept money, at least some, separate from Nigel.

Something happened. It wasn't the affair. That would never be a breaking point on its own. For a time, things were good. Better. Just like it used to be. But then Gabi wanted out. From Nigel. For good. So much careful planning went into her escape. The ticket was for Charlie. They would meet up in Lithuania. Somehow, she would slip away from Nigel. Take Katinka and run. Somewhere Nigel could never get to her.

Will thought back on the couple, perfect to outsiders looking in, with the shadow of Charlie trailing behind them. In an instant, he began to see the thread of things.

Gabi was an artist. Blissfully young. Beautiful and passionate. And someone like Nigel Lecter fell in love with her. A dangerous, mysterious man. Sinfully handsome. He wanted her from the moment he saw her. Willingly wrapped himself around her dainty little finger. To have a man like him so enamored with her was intoxicating.

What wouldn't he do to make her happy?

To see to every one of her needs and desires?

But Lecter men are not easy to love, to allow them to love as they need to. Possessive and intense. After a while, it was choking. To be a hyper-fixation wasn't easy for a free spirit like Gabi. Nigel might as well have clipped her stunning wings and thrown her in this cage of crystal and gold. He thought she was happy, but in truth she was suffocating.

Gabi loved him. And despised him. Nigel held her all the tighter for her struggling.

And then came Charlie.

Passionate, poetic Charlie. Just as fixated. Just as devoted. But somehow softer. Nigel gave her love steeped in blood and darkness, irresistible and addictive. Poisonous overtime. Choking. Destructive. Charlie was light and freedom. He was everything Nigel just didn't possess to provide her.

Gabi tried to stop seeing him. After a taste of what Charlie could give her, she desperately tried to stay away. For his sake. Nigel would never hurt Gabi. But Charlie? Nigel could kill him in the street, in broad daylight, and have no second thoughts.

It was a beautiful dream, being with Charlie. But that's all it would ever be.

So Gabi threw herself into being a good wife, loving and supportive. Nigel was the same as ever. Doting and ardent and obsessive. Terrifying. And then they had Katinka. Gabi tried to be happy. She was, really. Sometimes, she went a whole day without thinking about Charlie.

Why wasn't she happy? Why did she go to sleep with Nigel wrapped around her and want to run as far as she could? Why did she sometimes sing to Katinka and feel like screaming? Why couldn't she have remained blind and love Nigel like she did when they first met? Why did she have to see what he really was?

Something happened. Will came back to himself, blinking away the foggy visions in his head. He jerked wider awake in the chair, surprised to find it was dark outside. Shadows filled the room. The glow of the computer screen blinding now that Will was focused once again in the present. He powered the computer off and shut everything away for the night. With a tired sigh he began the trek back up to the penthouse.

Katinka still slept soundly, mobile played out long ago. He didn't have the heart to wake her for a bottle. Settling her blanket over tiny shoulders and pressing her stuffed lamb closer, Will didn't resist the urge to kiss her warm cheek.

He wandered the darkened apartment, unable to find Hannibal. There were signs of him. An empty glass abandoned on a desk in the alcove leading to the bedrooms. A worrisome detail on its own, but forgotten as Will noticed what was laid out next to it. CDs spread out and browsed through. An opened case missing the disk within. It was then that he heard music playing down the hall, echoing against walls and floors. Impossible to pinpoint where the delicate sound came from.

Will read the label on the jewel case. Looping handwriting, even with the thick black marker used. A recording that was several years old. As Will drew closer to the music, he could pick out the rich, deep sound of a masterfully played cello. Haunting. Powerful. A piece of Gabi saved forever. Immortalized. Then and there he decided to take the recordings with them, however many there might be. For Katinka.

When Will called out to Hannibal, an answering reply came from further down the dark hall. From Nigel and Gabi's bedroom. Once there, a trace of light beneath the door tipped Will off and he slid open the doors to the closet. A massive room that Will knew he would have laughed at seeing any other time. Wall to wall shelves and racks. In the middle of the room was a square counter full of accessories and odds and ends. Nigel was just as finicky about

his fashion as his twin. Half of the room was filled with his clothing and shoes, while the other half was Gabi's. Any other time he would have teased.

Will stopped on his way into the closet as he took in Hannibal. Shocked to stillness, appreciative silence. Hair tousled, nowhere near holding the style from earlier in the day. Sleeves of the black shirt rolled above his elbows. Tie missing and the top two shirt buttons undone. Socks and shoes absent. No longer drinking from a glass, the decanter of bourbon was half-empty and in reach as Hannibal sat on the floor. His back was to one of the walls filled with Armani suits and silk shirts.

It wasn't just a bottle of liquor by his foot.

Surrounding him, were a few boxes he had been in the middle of looking through. Some of them were familiar to Will in make and size. Gun safes. Missing their contents. In Hannibal's lax hand was a gun. Comfortable-looking in his grip, though this was the first time Will had seen him handle such a weapon. A perfect fit against Hannibal's palm, finger on the safety.

“I took out the bullets.”

Will shrugged and came to sit down beside him. It never occurred to him to worry. The silver sheen of the gun glinted even in the dim lighting as it shifted in Hannibal's hand. A large gun. Powerful and capable of dealing lots of damage in a short amount of time. A Smith and Wesson of excellent quality. Nigel had as superb taste in guns as he did in everything else. Will traced a finger along the edges of another safe. Empty. A smaller gun, from the looks of the indention meant to cradle it between uses. Made for a hand more petite than Nigel's.

“It's not amongst the firearms I've found,” Hannibal answered Will's unspoken question.

“It's Gabi's.” Will pressed his fingertips into the empty space, wondering at what the piece had looked like. Did Nigel pick it out? Just for Gabi? “She took it with her.” He turned to find Hannibal gazing at him, stare intense and cognizant for someone who had drunk such a large amount of strong alcohol in so short a time. Weighing if it was the right moment to reveal dark secrets recently discovered or not against the need to talk through everything he discovered without him, Will decided he needed another perspective more than decorum and reached into his pocket to show Hannibal the contraband. “This was in Nigel's desk.”

Hannibal's focus drifted to what he held. His head tilted in consideration. Reptilian almost in movement. “I am guessing that is not a stash of headache powders.”

Will's smile mirrored Hannibal's. A slight uptick to one side of his mouth. He shook his head. “No.”

“Do you suppose, Nigel often partook in recreational drug use?” As calm and impassive as he would be asking after the morning forecast.

Will shrugged and leaned against him, shoulder pressed into Hannibal's. Might as well have relaxed against a brick wall, as unyielding as the man was. “Maybe. I don't think that's what this is.”

“What do you think this is?”

Hannibal knew Will saw into things. Picked up on the unmentioned and unmentionable. Often, he asked Will for insight. If not to compare notes, to listen to Will's observations. This was one of those times.

From one look, one fleeting conversation, Will knew Nigel and Darko were on the outs. Here, now, after hours mulling it all over, Will was ready to give voice to what he knew. What Nigel and Gabi told him with the things they left behind. Lives left unfinished. Will thought of what they found, and didn't, in Nigel's scrubbed office and began to speak into the charged silence between them. Hannibal only stared at him, transfixed and not daring to interject.

“Nigel hadn't even been officially declared dead when files were looked through. Quite a few will have been removed. And whatever traces of what Darko wanted gone will have vanished. Whatever it is, implicated not just Nigel in something illegal. Something terrible.” Will held his palm up between them, letting the light catch and pass through the bottle resting there. “Whatever this is—it's just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Guns and drugs? That isn't the worst of it. Darko didn't work so hard, so meticulously, just to cover up something so common.

“Whatever happened, caused Nigel to up the security around himself and his family. Whatever it was, turned Gabi from him. Right back into the arms of Charlie, hoping to escape him. Whatever Nigel did, was involved in, made Gabi take her gun with her on the train. And I can't say for sure whether or not she would have used it on him.”

Hannibal became a blank and cold statue before his eyes. Nothing came through. He was completely closed off to Will. But Will didn't need his empathy to know Hannibal was furious and heartbroken. He didn't need his gifts or special way of thinking to know Hannibal retreated deep inside himself because of the agony he felt at Will's words. He didn't need any of those things to know why.

It wasn't because he was shocked at Nigel's alleged crimes. Appalled at what his twin was capable of. It was the lost opportunity. The tragedy of not knowing Nigel in this way. What they could have done together. What they almost could have been, side by side. The ache of never knowing for sure what terrible mayhem Nigel caused. The chaos Nigel would never bring about.

And then the statue returned to life. He came back to Will. Deadly stillness replaced with a flash of reflexes. Hannibal swiped the bottle from Will's prone hand. Still holding the gun, not even seeming to juggle the awkward handful, he unscrewed the cap to let bounce onto the floor. He pressed the tip of his pinky finger inside and then proceeded to lick the white powder that gathered onto it, barrel of the gun brushing his hair back from his forehead with his movement. As collected as ever. All in the span of a few seconds.

He gently smacked his lips together, as if considering the flavor of one of his exotic delicacies. “Cocaine.”

“Jesus, Hannibal!” Will snatched the sample back and fumbled around for the cap before he set it on one of the shelves behind him. Out of reach. A rich rasp of a chuckle followed his attempts at stopping Hannibal.

“This isn't the first time I've come in contact with such a substance, Will.”

His words reminded Will of the cocktail of drugs Hannibal used on Mason Verger. An alchemist creating special tinctures and brews for optimal results. Always so calm and sure, even while experimenting with something so potentially dangerous. His actions never seemed to hold any hesitancy, no matter what it was he got up to. A controlled recklessness.

Will hadn't seen that in a while. Not since before they began making plans to come here. Not until now. For days, Hannibal had been subdued. Hesitant. Tiptoeing and careful around Will. Containing everything he thought and felt as to appear stoic and unaffected by the world around him. Until given an opportunity to lash out. That heady recklessness slipping through the seams of his tightly held together persona. About to burst forth, though Hannibal still seemed to be grasping the reins on himself in a choking hold.

Will took the gun from Hannibal, locking it away once more. Hannibal only watched, curious and amused by Will's initiative. He pulled Hannibal away from the scavenged bones of Nigel's life, through the bedroom with its marble floor and crystal chandelier. They made it to the room they claimed as their own before Hannibal gave the slightest tug to Will's hand. A question, but not an admonition to Will leading him about.

“Will—” Hannibal didn't get more out before his lips were claimed in a kiss.

It could have been a question. A gentle rebuff as it had been the last few times Will instigated any sort of prolonged contact between them. Will pressed closer, swallowing words that faded into a sigh. There was a taste of salt on Hannibal's lips. A fizzing sort of buzz he sucked from his tongue. Not enough to feel the intended effects of what Nigel stashed away, but enough to feel a rush through his blood and heat beneath his skin. Perhaps, that was just Hannibal.

Hannibal cupped his jaw, taking control of the kiss. He leaned back only to nibble at Will's lips before licking his way down his throat. A bite to his jugular had Will tensing, gasping as strong arms wrapped around him to keep him place. To keep him from leaving.

“I've been so afraid to touch you,” Hannibal whispered into the skin of his shoulder as he pulled material out of the way to reach with searching lips.

“Why?”

“You know why.”

The words came out of the darkness, low and guttural. An inhuman scale of sound that a man's voice shouldn't be capable of producing. Resonating down deep to clutch in Will's belly. A warning. Temptation. Will pressed closer, giving demanding lips and hungry teeth unobstructed access to his vulnerable flesh. The tighter Will held on, the more bruising Hannibal's grip.

“Do it,” Will insisted. He kissed Hannibal's jaw, felt the silk of his shirt twist and warp under his clawing hands. “You can. Let go for me.”

Hannibal laughed against his cheek, ensnaring him with a firm grip in his hair. He was looking at Will but his eyes were hidden in the dark of the lengthening evening. “And if I can't find my way back?”

“I'll find you.”

“You will, won't you?” Hannibal traced the line of Will's cheekbone, the pulsing artery down his throat. “Let me ruin you. Let me shatter, trust that you'll arrange the pieces back together. But only in a way that fits your design.”

“You'll like the new you, I promise.”

Hannibal smiled at his words, a glint of teeth, before the tickling touch at his neck turned into a harsh grapple of his throat. Will pressed into the touch, their mouths colliding with a harsh clack. His wince was swallowed, along with the noises that rose up between them. There came the taste of blood and Will couldn't tell if it was his. It didn't really matter.

Often, Will found himself drift away during times like this. Sex was tricky for him, on a normal basis. With Hannibal it overwhelmed him, but not in the usual way. Will could get lost in another person's wants and desires, their pleasure taking over until Will barely felt the coupling. He always felt too much that he hardly ever felt anything. His mind lost in someone else' head until it never mattered what he felt.

Hannibal amplified Will's feelings until he overloaded on sensation. He pulled Will's desires to the surface. Selfish and hungry and gluttonous. Addictive. They mirrored one another so completely, melding into one mind and soul. It was easy to feel pleasure. Let Hannibal take him so high he got lost in the stratosphere. Drifting. A slow come down that Will knew was a form of missing time. A dissociation of a kind. It would worry most people. He didn't care.

Hannibal didn't let him fade this time. A frantic sort of need ran beneath every touch, every kiss, every gasp. It was almost as if he could tell when Will started slipping away and selfishly drew him back. Covetous. A refusal to let Will beyond his reach and influence. Will couldn't say he minded. It should have frightened him, the intensity of the act. More than sex. Not so common as merely making love. A touch more animal than fucking.

They had not touched each other in such a way in over a week. Will felt like dying the longer he went without Hannibal. Hannibal's hunger and all-consuming need. His intoxicating and dangerous brand of attention. Given to Will unconditionally and without reserve. Another way they connected that was suddenly kept from Will. A desolate sensation he never wanted to feel again. Once Hannibal stopped holding back, kept himself so tightly contained and controlled, Will knew the feeling was mutual. It hurt, being apart. So Hannibal gave in.

Will's cries were smothered in kisses. Tears and blood licked from his skin by a worshiping supplicant. Bruises and bites placed tenderly upon him with a love that Will returned unabashedly. In a bed not their own, a place neither man wanted to be. Will buried his face against Hannibal's neck, refusing to set eyes on his surroundings. He screamed his release

into flushed and sweaty flesh, a little death among countless wrung from him atop torn and twisted sheets.

They moved from the bed to the shower, unwilling to part just yet. The bathroom was black and gold. Another wall of windows that overlooked the sparkling cityscape of Bucharest at night. Glowing and pulsing and alive. Inspiration, perhaps, for the mosaic tiles of silver and gold all around them. Will barely took the time to appreciate the aesthetics, pressed between the tiled wall and Hannibal.

Warm water cascaded on and around them like soft rain. The foam that ran down his body was tinged pink. Capable hands, artistic hands, explored wherever they wished. A ravenous mouth followed their trail. Punishing and exquisite. Demanding and never satisfied, no matter how much was taken from Will. Everything could never be enough.

Will only held tighter, pulling Hannibal harder against him. He felt sheltered and safe. Adored and cherished. The most stable he had felt in a week. Breath blew sultry against his spine, over his shoulder. Lips once more gentle came to rest on the back of his neck. Will craned his head forward to grant the touches better access and he could feel the sated smile pressed into slick skin.

“Are you hungry, Will?” Hannibal found his voice once more.

Will leaned back against Hannibal's solid form, heat and strength seeping into him as hands slid from the bruises they left on his hips to slip around his waist. He didn't have to think long to find the answer. “Starving.”

* * * * *

Will checked on Katinka once they managed to separate. His hair still dripped into the collar of his shirt. She was cranky for being woken but Will knew from experience that if she didn't have one more bottle she would only wake later in the middle of the night. It was around that time, anyway. He pacified her fussiness and cuddled her close as she fed. A vastly different way in which she soothed Will's nerves than Hannibal's methods, but they were just as effective.

He took his time caring for her, rocking her until she fell asleep. Her little snuffles and sighs filled the room once again as he left only a nightlight in the shape of a sparkling dragonfly on and softly closed the door.

By the time he wandered into the living room, Hannibal was bringing the finishing touches to a set table. Once more calm and collected. Hair slicked back from the shower. A different shirt than the one that had ripped earlier. Heather gray instead of black, this time. Comfortable slacks that were no less tasteful for their casualness.

One would never guess that he had imbibed a shocking amount of bourbon and participated quite enthusiastically in energetic—possibly cocaine-provoked—sex not even an hour before. Will couldn't help smiling at the put-together image Hannibal flawlessly portrayed, knowing what all lurked beneath the placid surface. He caught Hannibal's eye and the little smile told Will he knew what he was thinking.

Will sat down and took in the display before him. He had no idea where Hannibal found chopsticks, or the saké he poured for them. They hadn't been apart that long and yet Will admired the expertly prepared sushi on the dishes. He was able to guess more of the large scallops that graced the simple but elegant plate. The striped flesh of vibrant salmon was easy for him to discern, as well. It escaped him, however, the fish presented on a bed of fresh greens. A milky flesh that turned scarlet closer to the delicate silver skin that still adhered to each slice.

“Mukozuke,” Hannibal said as he set the last dish down. “Translated, means 'placed to the side.' Referring to dishes—usually fine porcelain but we will make do—used to serve seasonal sashimi, eel and other foods that are delicious but unappealing to the eye. And, since we are in Romania, 'seasonal fish' means we are dining on scallop, salmon and mackerel.”

Will looked over the fish a little longer, noting the precision of each cut and the garnish of vegetables and fruits just as exquisitely prepared. “This is considered ugly?”

“For Japanese standards of aesthetics? Quite so.” Hannibal smiled, picking up a delicate slice of salmon between his chopsticks.

“I've never had mackerel raw.” Will selected a piece for his first bite. Hannibal watched as he chewed, swallowed. A strange flavor. Buttery, yet sour in a way. A kind of saltiness underlying everything else. Not at all unpleasant. “It has a very *complex* flavor,” Will decided on.

“That's very diplomatic of you, Will. Many people remark on the strong taste. 'Fishiness,' for lack of a better descriptor.”

Will shrugged and ate another piece. “I think I like that about it.” He considered the dishes and placement of each as he chewed. “A ceremony, this way of eating and presentation.” The saké was crisp and slightly sweet, refreshing after the events of the day and strenuous activity earlier.

The slightest pause in movement was the only indication that his words surprised Hannibal. He used the selection of a slice of scallop, chewing tender meat and swallowing the rest of his first glass of saké to gather himself. “It can be,” Hannibal said as he refreshed their drinks. “Often, it is included in the traditional multi-course meal of Kaiseki. A physical embodiment of the philosophy of wabi-sabi. Finding beauty and serenity in the unbalanced and imperfect. In the impermanent.”

“Fitting, to have this here and now.”

“Yes.” Hannibal glanced to Will and smiled before focusing on the arrangement of food. “The last time I made this was under similar circumstances.”

“A death in the family?”

“I made this for my aunt and uncle after a loss. Someone who was considered family. Not their child, but similar to my siblings and I. A very dear companion to Mischa.”

“Mourning food,” Will said into the somber quiet, small smile mirroring Hannibal's. “A commonality across the world, no matter how different a society and culture is—the idea of serving certain foods to those left behind, offering food to the dead. Growing up in the South, it's a concept as familiar to me as good manners and hospitality.”

A not so strained humor once more filled Hannibal's eyes, laced his voice. “You will have to make something for me.”

Will laughed, selecting a bright slice of salmon for his next bite. “I'm not sure funeral potatoes would compliment sashimi that well.”

“Cook an entire spread for me, then.” Hannibal's eyes were warm and adoring, sadness fading from them as he took up Will's hand to place a chaste kiss onto his knuckles. “What would you make, Will, to honor the dearly departed?”

* * * * *

An endless day melded into an incessant night. They had yet to sleep. Will would have preferred if he didn't need to sleep ever again. Hannibal happily and diligently obliged him. In between bouts of sex, they held each other close. Morning wasn't far off. As the sky above Bucharest began to blaze with slashes of fuchsia and cerulean, they whispered to each other. Secrets and thoughts held close and dear, plans for the future.

Hannibal combed a hand through Will's hair, playing with the strands in mindless tugs to the curls as they fell into a lull of their random conversations. Will found himself dozing at the touches, the gentle caressing along his back and up again to his shoulder. Over and over, ceaseless in their devoted exploration. It tickled. Lips pressed to his forehead, over the frown lines that appeared there. When Hannibal spoke, it was against the flushed skin he had yet to pull away from. His voice was distant, roughened by exertion and bone-deep satiation.

“Long ago, Lithuanians thought that people needed to be informed immediately of a relative's death. Even beloved pets were told of their owner's passing.”

“Another pagan ritual, before Christianity found its way there?”

“When a loved one died, the whole family was told, including the children. Even if it happened during the night. They would be roused from sleep and told of the death, or the deceased would take them with them.” Hannibal felt Will shiver and wrapped his arms around him, resting his cheek against the top of his head. “Why did seeing Gabi disturb you so much, Will? There was something other than the obvious, more than the viewing of her corpse.”

Will couldn't help the laugh that escaped him and he buried his face in the comforting warmth of Hannibal's shoulder, holding tighter to the man beneath him. A tear or two escaped him. Hannibal's need to know everything about him, his ability to pick up on things Will tried to keep hidden, was sometimes maddening. “I carried her with me for so long, there were days she completely took me over. It was strange seeing her there, outside of me.”

“As if you saw yourself on the examining table.”

“Yes.”

Hannibal pulled him up, wrapping strong fingers around his jaw and neck. His eyes swept over Will's features, memorizing every inch of him all over again. He smoothed his tears away. “When we first met, I often imagined the hold Nigel still had on you. A part of you taken away with the dead. Tricked into the journey along with all the others who died.”

Will held onto Hannibal by the wrists, elegant and fine-boned. He turned his head in the steady grip to kiss Hannibal's palm. “I did die, briefly.”

“Was it you, who tricked Death, then? Too busy with all the other lost souls that day, with nearly having you, that he didn't notice Katinka in your arms?”

Will didn't get to answer. Hannibal rolled, maneuvered Will beneath him in a quick twist of their bodies. His kisses silenced whatever Will might have said, stole whatever thoughts he might have conjured at those haunting words. Will didn't mind. He had no use for such things in Hannibal's arms. No matter how tightly they held him. Hannibal's love was choking. Stifling. A dark promise of devotion that Will would never escape. Not even in death. A promise Will would hold him to. Forever.

End

End Notes

A few things:

pterodactyl screech This was supposed to be short. Shorter than the next, and final, installment of this branch of the AU. I was all, “This is gonna be real quick. An exploration into death and dying and grieving. A hint of what is coming. A teasing look into these two characters. Simple! Easy-peasy!” And Nigel's all, “I fucking beg to differ.” I hope I still managed to do all previously mentioned. I hope it wasn't boring to anyone popping by. I still quite like what happened here, but that could just be me.

I wanted to write this particular piece to tie it all together and also to put an ending on this idea. I'm almost ready to explore the AU of AU's. Yes, that one. The one that explores Nigel and Gabi surviving. What better way to do that than put this idea completely to bed?

Also, I was trying something I never have before: attempting to tell the reader about two characters without those characters ever really being in the story. I didn't want readers to rely on outside sources for what they know of Nigel and Gabi. Nigel is a dangerous man. Gabi was beautiful and wild. They had a passionate relationship. Nigel loved her, she loved him. And yet, Gabi fell in love with someone else and had an affair. They're an interesting couple. Will isn't omniscient, even with his high degrees of empathy and deduction skills. I wanted to tease a little. Are his assumptions completely correct? He can't say. But this is all supposed to be a hint and what's to come. If anyone is still interested in reading a story with more Nigel in it. :D

Also, also, I went ahead and gave this an M rating. I toyed with this being a strong T, but there's a lot of heavy stuff happening here, even without explicit violence or sex. I thought I'd err on the side of caution. If anyone feels different, let me know your thoughts. I'd love to hear what you think, regardless.

Stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers! Catch you on the flipside!

~CReed

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